DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 180 363 HE 012 100

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TITLE A Comparison of the Educational Aspirations of Students Entering a Predominantly White College and Students Entering a Predominantly Black College.
PUB DATE Oct 79
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Association for Institutional Research (Orlando, FL, October 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement: *Academic Aspiration: Black Colleges: *Black Students: *Caucasian Students: *College Freshmen: Comparative Analysis: Expectation: Family Background: Higher Education: Institutional Characteristics: Motivation: *Occupational Aspiration: Race: Social Background
IDENTIFIERS *Appalachian State University NC: *North Carolina Central University

ABSTRACT

The results of two student surveys were analyzed to assess the educational aspirations and occupational plans of the students. Comparison of the two surveys, one given to the 1978 freshman class at North Carolina Central University (NCCU), a predominantly black, state-supported university, and the other to the 1978 freshman class at Appalachian State University, a state-supported university with a predominantly white student body, revealed a large difference in the educational aspirations of the two groups. The freshmen at Appalachian State were better prepared academically, with higher average SAT scores and tended to rank higher in their high school classes. A higher percentage of the parents of the Appalachian State freshmen were reported to have completed high school, some college training, and a higher percentage had completed bachelors degrees and advanced or professional degrees than the parents of NCCU freshmen. Despite these statistics, the survey indicated that freshmen at Appalachian State University had more modest educational aspirations than the freshmen at NCCU. This discrepancy between the expectations that society might have for the NCCU freshmen and the aspirations they hold for themselves is discussed. The selected majors of the two groups are examined and their occupational plans are compared. Further research in this area is recommended. (Author/SF)

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# A COMPARISON OF THE EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF STUDENTS ENTERING A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE COLLEGE AND STUDENTS ENTERING A PREDOMINANTLY BLACK COLLEGE*

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ABSTRACT

Comparisons of similar items on two freshmen surveys, one administered to the 1978 freshmen class at a predominantly black state-supported university in North Carolina and one administered to a predominantly white state-supported university in the same state, revealed one particularly striking anomaly--the educational aspirations of the students at the predominantly black institution were a great deal higher than those at the predominantly white institutions. Although similar but somewhat conflicting results have been found in the literature, the fact that the academic achievement of both the students and their parents was better at the predominantly white institution would indicate that there is a large discrepancy between societal expectations and black student aspirations. Further research into this phenomenon is not only of great importance in the counseling of students, but could also play a significant role in the problem of declining black enrollment in professional and graduate schools.

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*Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Southern Association for Institutional Research, Orlando, Florida, October, 1979.

The proportion of minority students enrolled in graduate and professional schools in the United States is not only low; it is on the decline. The push in the late 60's and early 70's to increase the enrollment of minority students in these areas has leveled off. By 1978 the ratio of black to white law students was less than 10%, although 12% of the nation's population is black. Medical school enrollment figures show a drop in the percentages of blacks from 6.3% in 1974-75 to 6.1% in 1976-77. In fact blacks, the largest of all minority groups in the United States, represent only about six percent of all graduate students (Blackwell, 1978).

What is behind this downward trend in the number of blacks enrolled in professional schools and why is the proportion of blacks in graduate school so much lower than that of the population at large. Given the lower socioeconomic status of blacks in this country and the traditional positive relationship between educational aspirations/achievement and social background, one might conclude that the decline is a function of lower aspirational levels of black students.

This does not, however, seem to be the case. Some researchers, in fact, have concluded that blacks, perhaps unrealistically, hold very high educational and occupational aspirations (Doughtie, et al, 1976). Parsons (1978) found that attitudinal factors were the best predictors of high career aspirations for women but that membership in a racial minority group was the second best predictor for the women in their study. Drew and Astin (1972) found two variables, race (black) and sex (male), were the best predictors of high educational aspirations. Conflicting results have been reported. For example, Carter, Little, and Barabasz (1972) found no sex or race differences in attitudes toward school, in educational aspira-

tions, or in occupational aspirations among a sample of 104 seventh and eighth grade students at the State University of Buffalo Campus School. In general, however, race has been delineated as an important variable in the study of aspirations, and Epps (1975) concluded on the basis of an extensive review of the literature that occupational and educational aspirations of black students are "...equal to or higher than those of white students with similar backgrounds."

Further investigation in this area seemed desirable. As a result of regularly scheduled freshmen surveys, data from students at a large predominantly white university and from a predominantly black university were available to the researchers. Since both surveys conducted in 1978 included questions related to educational aspirations, comparisons of the two schools on the variables were made.

Descriptions and Comparisons

In the fall of 1978, the entering freshman classes at North Carolina Central University (NCCU), a traditionally black institution and Appalachian State University (ASU), a traditionally white institution, were administered surveys containing demographic, attitudinal, and aspirational items. These two sets of data, along with relevant information from the two schools' admissions files, were compared.

Both of the institutions are state-supported, four-year universities, granting masters' and professional degrees. A primary function of both universities has been to prepare young people of the region to teach in the elementary and secondary schools throughout North Carolina, NCCU to train blacks and ASU to train whites. Today, twenty-five years after the Brown decision, each institution continues to serve principally the ethnic population which it initially served. The racial composition of headcount

enrollment at the two institutions, shown in Table I, bears this out.

TABLE I

Racial Composition of Student Bodies and of Survey Samples at Two Institutions

| | | BLACKS | | WHITES | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | INSTITUTION | NO. | % | NO. | % |
| Student Body | ASU | 217 | 2.4 | 8,679 | 96.8 |
| | NCCU | 4,276 | 88.9 | 451 | 9.4 |
| Freshman Survey Sample | ASU | 39 | 2.5 | 1,524 | 96.3 |
| | NCCU | 682 | 98.7 | 9 | 1.3 |

The geographical locations of the institutions are dissimilar. North Carolina Central University is located in Durham, North Carolina, a moderately large metropolitan area which developed around the tobacco industry. The county has a population of over 140,000, more than one-third of which is black. Appalachian State University, on the other hand, is nestled among the mountains in the small (about 12,000) North Carolina town of Boone. Blacks comprise less than three percent of the residents of Boone, where the major industries are farming and tourism.

Of the 1704 freshmen entering ASU in the fall of 1978, 1603 or 94% completed a student questionnaire during freshman orientation. Another questionnaire was administered to 696 first-time freshmen in all freshman orientation classes at NCCU in fall 1978. Virtually all NCCU freshmen are enrolled in these classes and those surveyed represented about 84% of 833 entering freshmen that semester. Although the instruments administered at these two institutions were not identical, due to differing institutional needs and objectives, researchers wanted to examine the issue of freshman aspirational level at predominantly white and predominantly black institutions; and, thus, items concerning relevant questions were included in both.

Table I summarizes racial proportions, not only of the universities' student bodies but of the groups responding to the surveys. The two groups are practically reversed in terms of black/white ratio, both samples being composed of less than three percent of the minority presence.

The average SAT scores for 1978 entering freshmen at NCCU were considerably lower than those at ASU and for the nation as shown in Table II. The ASU freshmen average scores were only slightly below the national mean. These data confirm other reports of dissimilar performance by blacks and whites on standardized measures (Blackwell, 1978). The NCCU mean scores for verbal and math (and the frequency curves as well) are proximate. Notice, however, that for the predominantly white samples--ASU and the national comparison groups--there are large discrepancies in verbal and math scores.

TABLE II

Average SAT Scores for NCCU and ASU Compared to National Norms

| Score | MEAN SCORES ASU | NCCU | National Sample |
|---|---|---|---|
| Verbal | 421 | 350 | 429 |
| Math | 456 | 357 | 468 |
| Total SAT | 877 | 707 | 897 |

Table III contains a summary of the parental educational backgrounds of the freshmen at ASU and NCCU. Two findings should be noted. First, the educational attainment of the ASU fathers or male guardians is much higher overall than that of fathers in the NCCU sample. Only at two levels of educational achievement were there large discrepancies between the mothers; a greater percentage of mothers of NCCU freshmen did not finish high school and a larger percentage of ASU mothers finished college. The second interesting discovery is that the mothers of NCCU freshmen reached higher educational levels than the fathers while at ASU the reverse seems to be true.

TABLE III

Educational Background of Parents

of the Freshmen Class

| Educational Level | FATHERS | |
|---|---|---|
| | ASU N=1574 | NCCU N=619 |
| Did not finish high school | 10.7 | 41.0 |
| Finished high school | 23.4 | 29.9 |
| Business, trade/some college | 23.5 | 15.7 |
| Finished College | 26.5 | 8.2 |
| Advanced or Professional | 15.9 | 5.2 |
| | MOTHERS | |
| | ASU N=1570 | NCCU N=657 |
| Did not finish high school | 7.3 | 27.7 |
| Finished high school | 36.1 | 35.8 |
| Business, trade/some college | 26.1 | 20.1 |
| Finished College | 23.1 | 11.0 |
| Advanced or Professional | 7.5 | 5.5 |

Results and Discussion

Table IV illustrates a noticeable differences between freshmen at the two universities in planned levels of educational attainment. Only 33.3% of the students at Appalachian State University expected to obtain a degree beyond the Bachelor's as compared to 72% of the students at North Carolina Central University. Furthermore, 12% of the students at the historically black institution and only 4% of the students at the historically white institution expected to acquire a doctor's degree. In light of the declining enrollment of blacks in graduate schools and the differences found in academic achievement and family background between the predominantly white and the predominantly black samples, the results are remarkable. As mentioned earlier, results of a similar nature (though of smaller magnitude) have been documented.

TABLE IV

Educational Aspirations of Freshmen

| Level of Education Expected to Complete | % of Freshmen | |
|---|---|---|
| | ASU N=1547 | NCCU N=683 |
| Less than a bachelor's degree | 2.4 | 2.5 |
| Bachelor's degree | 64.3 | 25.0 |
| Master's degree | 23.1 | 46.6 |
| Professional degree | 6.2 | 14.1 |
| Doctor's degree | 4.0 | 11.9 |

An examination of Table V reveals no striking differences between the majors of freshmen at ASU and those at NCCU. A somewhat higher percentage of ASU freshmen (18.8) chose education as a major than did NCCU freshmen (9.2). Larger percentages of NCCU freshmen designated Political Science and Social Science/Sociology as majors (7.9% and 7.8% respectively) as compared to 1.8% and 1.7% at ASU. This latter observation is in agreement with research reported by Doughte et al (1976) which indicated that blacks chose "social type occupations" more often than whites. A greater percentage of NCCU freshmen selected business/accounting majors (32.6) as compared to 29.9 percent of ASU freshmen. Note that business is by far the most popular choice at both institutions, a finding in congruence with results of a national survey (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1979, p. 6). In sharp contrast to the comparison of educational aspirations, examination of educational majors of ASU and NCCU freshmen is more remarkable for the similarities of choice than for the differences.

TABLE V

Declared Majors of Freshmen

| Major Area | % of Freshmen | |
|---|---|---|
| | ASU N=1376 | NCCU N=679 |
| Home Economics | 1.5 | 2.7 |
| Math | 2.5 | 1.7 |
| History | 1.2 | 1.1 |
| Psychology | 3.9 | 5.0 |
| Foreign Language | 1.0 | 0.3 |
| Art | 5.0 | 2.0 |
| Music | 2.7 | 3.4 |
| Drama | 1.0 | 1.0 |
| Biology | 7.3 | 3.3 |
| Physics | 0.7 | 0.1 |
| Chemistry | 0.7 | 0.4 |
| English | 1.7 | 1.4 |
| Education | 18.8 | 9.2 |
| Health & Physical Education | 5.2 | 5.3 |
| Political Science | 1.8 | 7.9 |
| Sociology, Social Science | 1.7 | 7.8 |
| Philosophy | 0.3 | 0.3 |
| Library Science | 0.1 | -- |
| Geology | 0.9 | -- |
| Business/Accounting | 29.9 | 32.6 |
| Communications | 3.8 | -- |
| Computer/Information Science | 2.9 | -- |
| Nursing | -- | 10.4 |
| Health Science | 2.1 | -- |
| Recreation Management | 1.5 | 0.9 |
| Public Affairs, Law | 2.4 | -- |

## Conclusions

One compelling fact emerges from this study: the freshmen at NCCU have startlingly high levels of aspiration when compared to freshmen at ASU. Are these aspirations realistic? There is general agreement that, as a group blacks perform less well than their white counterparts on most standardized tests (Blackwell, 1978; Tollett, 1978), tests designed to predict academic performance in as well as to admit these students to the graduate and professional schools to which they aspire. The SAT scores summarized herein are in line with this premise. However, Allen, et al (1979) found that SAT scores were not as useful predictors for black as for white performance at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and other studies (Uhl and Pratt, 1977; Pratt, Uhl and Davis, 1979) indicate that questionnaire items concerning motivation may well be effective predictors of performance at NCCU, both in the undergraduate school and in the School of Law. Given these important findings regarding black performance, the aspirations of the NCCU freshmen, nevertheless, are far above those that might be expected.

Obviously, if these aspirations are unreasonably high for a large proportion of the students, then many will experience failure. The problem becomes one of making students aware of alternative careers in which they may have a better chance of success. This approach must be taken with extreme caution, however, since it appears that we lack adequate criteria for separating those students with higher potential for success in graduate and professional schools from those with lesser potential. Given the decline of black enrollment in the professional schools, it is also imperative that the pool of blacks aspiring to these schools remain large enough to halt and reverse the descent.

The critical question remains, therefore, of how to strike a balance between the national need to increase the number of blacks in professional and graduate schools and the need to protect students from the bitterness and disappointment that may come with failure to reach their goals.

Further research in this area is desperately needed. Some topics of potential investigation are the aspirations of blacks in more integrated institutions; a comparison of blacks in northern and southern colleges; effective predictors of black performance; sex/race interaction with regard to educational and occupational aspiration; and a follow-up study of the students described in this paper in three to four years.

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